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AN AWFUL CHRISTMAS EVE ADVENTURE.

A Reminiscence of Early Washington.

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This is the man should do the bloody deed:
The image of a wicked, heinous fault
Lives in his eye; that close aspect of his
Does show a mood of a much troubled breast.
—*Shakespeare.*

"Tommy Sparks! you've lost the way!"

"Oh, no I haven't, Aunt Drake!"

"I say you have! This ain't the New Cut road! It is the old turnpike where the peddler was murdered!"

"Oh, no! Aunt Drake! It's so dusty you can't see! But it's all right! I know the road!" cried Cousin Tommy with a confident side long nod of his curly red head.

"I tell you it is all wrong! Don't I know? This is the old abandoned turnpike, and these are the very thick of the woods where Fice and his gang prowl! And the night is going to be as dark as pitch! And here's a storm coming up! There, now! I just felt a spit of snow in my face!"

These were the words that roused me—Dolly Phippard, a girl of fifteen—from a comfortable doze on the back seat of our old carry-all, as it slowly drew up in the darkness of a deep forest, and they frightened me half to death, for though old aunt spoke with more annoyance than anxiety, yet were her words alarming, to say the least. Let me briefly explain.

This was in the primitive period of our national capital, when it consisted of a few dwelling houses grouped around the principal public buildings; around the executive mansion and the departments in the west, the Capitol on Capitol Hill, the navy yard in the east, and the arsenal in the south, with wide wastes of marsh lands and scrub wood between each group. And when Pennsylvania avenue was as ill-kept as a country road, sparsely built up on either side with assorted houses of one-story frame to three stories of brick; with narrow, unclean sidewalks and open gutters fringed with coarse grass and rank weeds. And at the junction of 7th street was a large cluster of low, open cattle sheds called the Marsh market. This avenue was muddy in wet weather and dusty in dry.

The country around Washington was not very thickly settled. The farms and plantations lay along the banks of the river, or near them, and the interior was still occupied by vast tracts of forest.

Nearly all the land traveling was done on horseback or in private carriages. All the water travel was done by little sailing coasters.

There was no organized police force. If there had been Jim Fice and his band could not have existed a week. They were a legacy of the war just closed. While the British forces under General Ross were passing through the lower counties of Maryland on their march upon Washington they were joined by a few fugitive slaves, who proved very useful to them in guiding their foraging parties to the best-filled "meat houses," poultry yards and granaries on the various plantations, and, by so doing, acquired a passion for pillage and adventure. But when the British troops withdrew from Washington, they left the fugitives behind them. The latter were afraid to meet their masters, even if they had been willing to return to work, which they were not. They sought shelter in the depths of Prince George's forest, where their nocturnal outbreaks and sudden attacks and depredations upon lonely travelers or defenceless dwellings spread terror through the neighborhood. There were said to be two or more white men among them—deserters from the British army, and more atrocious villains than the negroes themselves.

The leader of this band was one Jim Fice, often called "The Fice"—not at all the ideal negro ruffian, for he was small, thin, black as jet, and crafty, swift and cruel as the tiger.

Only a month before this night of our adventure the robbery and abuse of two poor girls, weavers by trade, who lived together in a lonely house and who barely escaped with their lives, had thrilled the community with horror and indignation. And within a fortnight the murder and robbery of a harmless peddler had raised the popular fury to fever heat. It would have fared badly with The Fice and his fellow fiends if they had been caught. A quick prayer and a slow fire would have been their reward. But the age of detective police organizations was yet to come.

Few women would have had the pluck of our old Aunt Sukey—Mrs. Susannah Drake—or dared to have started in a private conveyance on a forty miles drive through that demon-haunted district. But Aunt Sukey was a woman of indomitable courage, and she looked it. She was the ideal Amazon—the tallest woman I ever saw—broad shouldered, deep chested and muscular, without an ounce too much of flesh, erect as a flag staff and bearing her sixty years as if they had been but thirty. She was no more concerned about Jim Fice than she was about Dick Turpin.

We lived at that time in a large red brick house surrounded by a luxurious garden that occupied a whole city square, fronting on New Jersey avenue.

Our household consisted of Aunt Sukey, Cousin Tommy Sparks and myself, Dolly Phippard, and a family of negro servants.

On the morning of the 23d of December, after a breakfast by candle light, we three entered our old carry-all with our strong old draught mare Kitty harnessed before and our old yellow hair-covered trunk strapped on behind, and started on our long journey down into St. Mary's county to spend the Christmas holidays at the old homestead, "Greenwood," then occupied by Aunt Sukey's elder brother, Jack Greenfield. The sun was rising just as we passed over the Eastern Branch bridge, and promised a glorious winter day. A six hours' pleasant drive brought us to Horse Head, an old-fashioned tavern about eighteen miles from the city. It was now 11 o'clock and we stopped there to dine and to feed and rest our mare. After two hours' rest and refreshment we prepared to resume our journey.

The landlord tried to persuade Aunt Sukey to "put up" there for the night, declaring that it was not safe for ladies to travel in that district with no better protection that we had, especially in the evening. But our intrepid aunt was resolute.

"Tommy Sparks has gots the blunderbus in the bottom of the carry-all, and we shall get to Spring Hill before dark and stay all night there. Besides, I am not afraid! I believe these stories about Fice and his doings all exaggerated! They may murder a poor, friendless peddler, or maltreat two poor, helpless girls, and they'll be burnt at the stake for it yet! but they'll never dare to interfere with us! Tommy Sparks, hurry up! Make the hostler put the mare to the carry-all! It's clouding over, and I should not wonder if we should have snow!" said our warlike relative with the air of a field marshal issuing an order.

Cousin Tommy obeyed. What else could he do? To argue the point with Aunt Sukey would have been as useless as to expostulate with the gathering storm.

We re-entered our carry-all, Aunt Sukey and myself occupying the back seat, and Cousin Tommy perched on the front seat, with the reins in his hands, the back of his curly red head shining before us.

"Keep to the New Cut road, Tommy Sparks, and drive faster, or we shall not get to Spring Hill in time, and Molly will be sitting up for us."

"All right, Aunt Drake," replied Cousin Tommy, with that sidelong nod of his head that was peculiar to him.

Spring Hill was a fine, breezy farm house on the top of an elevation, from which it was named, and it was the home of another relative. The road after leaving Horse Head skirted the edge of the forest, sometimes passing under the shadow of leafless trees and sometimes out upon the open. The light of the short winter's afternoon was fading fast. The sun sank behind a pile of clouds. Soon we could not clearly see the road. Aunt Sukey and myself were both tired. We ceased to talk to each other and lay back in our seats. I think we both fell asleep and slept for some time. I know that I was dozing comfortably when I was suddenly roused by the voice of our aunt crying sharply: "Tommy Sparks! you've lost the way!"

"What is the matter, Aunt Sukey?" I faltered as soon as I could collect my faculties, scattered by the fright.

"What is the matter? Why this blockhead has taken the wrong fork and fetched us right into the thick of the forest and into a nest of runaway niggers, for what I know!" angrily answered Aunt Sukey.

"Oh! Lord Almighty, Aunt Drake!" now cried poor Tommy in the depth of distress and apprehension.

"I'll never trust such a fool again even to trundle a wheelbarrow!" relentlessly exclaimed our aunt.

"What do you want me to do," Aunt Drake? I'll do anything you tell me!" meekly replied Cousin Tommy.

"Don't be a donkey! Turn right round and go back as fast as you can until you get to the fork and then take the other road! Oh, the idiots in this world!"

"Aunt Sukey, I couldn't turn here if it was to save our lives! The road is that narrow and the trees grow that close together!" said poor Tommy, almost crying.

"Then back the horse until you can turn, you ass! Oh, what a fool I was to trust you! It serves me right!"

"But, Aunt Sukey, I have driven the mare for you these five years past, ever since I was fourteen years old, and never drove you wrong but this once!"

"No! and you couldn't murder me but once if you tried! Could you?"

"Oh, Lord! Aunt Drake!"

"Hold your tongue and back and turn the carry-all!"

"But I can't, Aunt Drake. The road is narrower than this for miles farther back, and it's up hill, too!"

"Was there ever such an aggravating jackass? Well, then, drive on. It's no use stopping here all night with the snow falling. Go on, I tell you! The road must lead to some place."

Tommy touched up the mare again and we went on slowly and more slowly, the road narrowing and narrowing until the branches of the trees on either side scraped against the leather curtains.

Presently the carry-all stopped, the mare reared and Cousin Tommy wailed, really wailed, forth in his distress:

"We can't go a foot farther! Kitty's got her head in the trees!"

Aunt Sukey uttered an exclamation of anger and disgust and we both stooped forward to look, while Kitty backed a little and got her head out of the thicket. It was dark as pitch. We could scarcely see the difference between the falling snow and the leafless trees, yet we perceived that we had driven into a sort of cul-de-sac, with a close barrier of interlaced tree branches across the road stopping our way. The desperation of the case was that we could neither go forward nor turn back.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish, Tommy Sparks! I declare to man you are the biggest fool I ever saw in the whole course of my life!" exclaimed our distracted relative.

"'Deed, Aunt Drake, I couldn't help it! I didn't know the road was grown up in this way!" pleaded the poor fellow.

"Hold your tongue and get out and push on ahead. You can get through if the mare coulnd't. And try if you can see any house or barn where we may get under cover. It will never do to stay out here to be snowed up and frozen to death."

"Yes, Aunt Drake," meekly replied the youth, as he got off his seat. Stooping near the ground, pushing aside the branches of the tress, he slowly made his way along the choked road and passed out of sight, while we sat shivering with the cold and brushing off the snow that had sifted in between the curtains of the carry-all and half covered our cloaks and bonnets.

It seemed a long time before our messenger was heard craunching over the frozen snow and breaking through the dry woods on his return from his errand.

"Aunt Drake," he said, as he came up to the side of the carry-all, "I saw a light 'way back in the thicket on the right side of the road, and it seemed to come from the window of a house, but there was no path."

"Then why didn't you take a bee line to it and find out what it was?" sharply demanded Mistress Drake, still angry and disposed to find fault.

"I—I—I"—— began Tommy, but she cut him short.

"Help me out! Come along, Dolly! We'll go to this house and see if we can get shelter."

We got down in the snow, scrambled on past the mare and through the obstructing trees, and made our way to a clearer part of the narrow road, and struggled on through the distracting and blinding snow, looking out for the light. A little farther on we came in sight of it far off, faintly gleaming from the thicket on the right.

"Come along! We'll take a bee line straight for that beacon," said Aunt Sukey, valiantly.

"But it might—it might"—— began Tommy Sparks, cautiously.

"Might what, you simpleton?" demanded Mrs. Drake.

"Might be Jim Fice's hut!" gasped Tommy.

"Fiddlesticks! Jim Fice's hut, indeed! Jim Fice don't live in a hut near any road. He hides in a hole under the hills in the deep of the forest and he wouldn't be like to show a light. Come on," sternly ordered our aunt, as she turned sharply around and pushed into the thicket.

Tommy followed, and I, in deadly doubt, brought up the rear. This intrepid aunt of ours was a terror only less than Fice himself. If any human being was likely to lead us to death through defiance of danger it was Mistress Susannah Drake.

After scrambling through the woods, tearing our clothes, stubbing our toes and scratching our ankles and hands, we came to a rough log cabin in the bush.

The hut had a low door and a little window in front, a steep roof and at one end a great, clumsy chimney. The light which we had seen came through the window.

Aunt Sukey knocked at the door. Then we waited, but no sound came from within. She knocked again more loudly. But it was not until after repeated knockings that we heard a sign of life from within. At last came a sound of a grumbling voice and shuffling of feet and the door was opened.

There stood a man holding a flaring tallow candle in a brass candle stick. I thought he was the most forbidding-looking being I had ever seen. He was tall, gaunt, with a thin, red face, a bald red head fringed around by ragged red hair at the nape of his neck and a ragged red beard on his chin. He was clothed in a coarse red flannel shirt and brown cloth trousers. He blinked at us with bloodshot eyes, cautiously holding the door but half open, and asked:

"Who be you? What do you want here?"

"We are travelers from the city. We have lost our way and have been caught in this storm, and we want a night's lodging, and we are willing to pay well for the accommodation," Aunt Sukey explained.

"Pay well for it, eh? Well, then, I reckon you'd better come in outen the storm," he said, opening the door and making way for us to pass, then closing it quickly, for the snow was driving in.

We found ourselves in a large, low room. The walls were of thick logs with the bark on; the floor was mother earth, beaten hard and level; the ceiling was of rough planks that had shrunk apart, leaving open lines between them; the fireplace was built of the rudest stone and without hearth or fender or andirons. A dull, smouldering fire of heavy chunks threw a murky red glow over the place. In the corner to the right of the chimney stood a large, low-post bed covered with a dark quilt, under which some one seemed to be sleeping. In the opposite corner was a row of wooden shelves, furnished with crockery, tin and stone ware, and under the bottom shelf iron pots and kettles, and so forth. At the other end of the room, in one corner, stood a large spinning-wheel; in the other corner a machine that looked something like a bedstead, but more like the picture of a guillotine I once saw in an illustrated history of the French revolution. It was in reality an old-fashioned loom. Between these corners stood a common ladder leaning against the wall and leading to a trap-door that evidently opened into the loft above. A rickety old rocking chair in the chimney corner, a pine table against the wall under the window, and a few three-legged stools completed the furniture.

"We left our horse and carry-all out in the road. We could not get them any farther," Aunt Sukey explained as soon as the old man turned around from closing the door.

"Couldn't, eh? Well, I reckon not! Jis set down and wait tell I wake up my ole 'oman to 'tend to you, and then I'll go out with the young youth there and look arter your creetur," said the old man as he moved off toward the bed.

Aunt Sukey deposited herself in the chair by the chimney corner, and I perched myself on a three-legged stool, while Cousin Tommy stood and leaned against the jambs of the door, waiting to show our host the way to the carry-all, while the man himself was trying to rouse his wife from what seemed to be a very deep sleep.

"You see, she tuk a goodish dose of laudamy for the toothache, but I reckon I kin wake her, and as the tooth is easy she kin 'tend to you," he explained, as he renewed his efforts.

"Pray, do not disturb her on any account, for we only need a night's lodging," said our aunt.

But the man had already succeeded in rousing the woman, who sat straight up in the bed, and, though still drowsy, needed but a few words to enable her to understand the situation.

"Gimme a pinch of Scotch snuff and I'll git right up," she said.

The man complied with her request, and after several resonant sneezes she rose, shook herself, and was ready to administer to our wants. As she had tumbled into bed with all her clothes, she did not seem to think her toilet required attention. She was a small, thin, sallow woman with jet black hair and black eyes, and was clothed in a dark skirt and a striped linsey sack.

But I scarcely looked at her. My attention was taken up by the movements of the man. He was preparing to go out with Tommy Sparks by putting on a heavy coat. Not much in that. No, but it was a British soldier's coat. Too well I knew the uniform. And this ill-looking man might be one of the very deserters from the British army who had joined Jim Fice's band of robbers and murderers. I hardly dared to breathe my suspicions, and, indeed, before I could collect my startled faculties—startled and scattered by the sight of the coat—the man had gone out, carrying a lighted lantern and followed by Tommy Sparks. I turned to speak to Aunt Sukey, but she was listening to the woman, who was saying: "I reckon as you'd like some supper."

"We would like a cup of tea, but I hate to put you to the trouble, when you are not well, too," said Aunt Sukey apologetically.

"Oh, that sin't nothink! I shill sleep all the sounder when I git to bed agin," she replied, as she began to put the chunks together and pile on more fuel from a heap under the shelves until we had a glorious fire flaming up the chimney. Then she filled the kettle and hung it on a hook from the crane. Finally she drew out the table, covered it with a clean crash cloth, set it with white crockery ware and placed upon it some cold corn-pone bread, a plate of butter and a dish of cold bacon, saying deprecatingly:

"I'm down right mortified as I havn't nothink better for you quality; but 'deed I don't feel that ekal to cook a hot supper!"

"Certainly you don't! and I feel almost ashamed to give you this much trouble," said Aunt Sukey sympathetically."

"Oh, that ain't nothink," again repeated the woman; "I shill sleep like a top when I go to bed agin."

It was while she was making the tea when we heard the footsteps of the man and boy and the snorting and trampling of the mare as they came breaking through the brush. They passed on around to the rear of the house, where we heard them at work over the "creetur."

When they came in the tea was ready to go on the table. And it may disgust you to hear what a hearty meal we three made of the coarse fare, but a twenty-mile drive over rugged roads on a keen winter's day and a fast of eight hours or more are better appetizers than any amount of bitters and sauces. So, in spite of hidden anxieties we cleared the platters.

"I reckon as how you quality would like to go to bed now," suggested the sleepy woman, yawning and gaping until she showed all her teeth or want of teeth, as we rose from the table.

Aunt Sukey thanked her and said that we would, but I looked around to see where our bed was to be found.

"Come along o' me then," said our hostess, as she took up the candle and led the way to the ladder and began to climb it slowly and carefully, holding on to the sides.

"Good night, Tommy Sparks! I forgive you! I never let the sun go down on my wrath. (All Aunt Sukey's wrath had risen after the sun had set, by the way.) Don't forget to say your prayers, Tommy Sparks! And, mind you, be up early in the morning! Do you hear?"

"Yes, Aunt Drake! Good-night!"

Fortified by this assurance, Aunt Sukey climbed slowly up the ladder. I, after bidding my cousin good-night, and wondering where he was to sleep, followed my leaders.

Emerging from the trap-door, we found ourselves in a long, low loft, whose roof of rough planks met on a beam overhead and sloped down to the eaves on either side, where the shrunken floor let through lines of fire light from the room below. From the beam dangled ropes of onions, dried apples, sweet herbs, and in their midst a smoked tongue and ham. At the farther end, against the chimney, where there was no fireplace, stood a low bedstead neatly made up and covered with a blue yarn spread. Against the sloping roof on the front stood a large packing box turned upside down, and provided with a stone pitcher and a tin basin, which did duty as a washstand. There was no other furniture of any description in the loft.

"Now, I'll see if there's any water in the pitcher. No, there ain't. I'll go and fetch some," said the woman, as she set the candle on the washstand and took the pitcher and went down the ladder.

"Aunt!" I said in a little tremor, "I wonder where Cousin Tommy is going to sleep."

"I don't know. I guess they will make him a pallet on the floor down stairs," she replied indifferently.

"I wish he could be nearer to us," I sighed, for I was very uneasy, I scarcely knew why.

"What for? He couldn't be any protection to us even if we wanted any, which we don't."

"I am not so sure of that," I sighed again.

The return of our hostess stopped further talk.

I went and met her at the trap-door and took the heavy pitcher from her hands.

"Ar' thar anythink else you want?" our hostess inquired in a tired voice.

"No, thank you! But we should like to know where Mr. Sparks is going to sleep."

"You mean the young man down stairs? Well, he's gwine to sleep out in the shed 'long o' the creetur."

"But that is dreadful on such a night as this too!" exclaimed Aunt Sukey, joining the conversation for the first time.

"There's plenty of clean straw and thick blankets. I do the best I kin for you quality, ma'am, and I kin do no better, no ways. It's his doings!" And without waiting for further expostulation she began to go backward down the ladder, with her hand stretched up against the trap-door which she let fall slowly after her.

Aunt and I looked at each other. Even stout-hearted Mistress Drake seemed suspicious and apprehensive. And as for me, I shrunk in doubt and fear of that man at the first sight of his evil face and things that had happened in the house since our entrance had increased my antipathy. Now my dread of him almost amounted to horror.

"Aunt! what object can that old man have in sending Cousin Tommy out of the house to sleep?" I inquired.

"The Lord knows! Come, Dolly! Say your prayers and get ready for bed! I never was so worn out in all my life!" said my aunt with a calmness that I could not help thinking was assumed to reassure me.

A few minutes after I had blown out the candle and crept into bed beside Aunt Sukey who was the first to lie down, I found her fast asleep, by her deep breathing, not to say mild snoring. I knew then that I must have been mistaken in having supposed her to be uneasy. And I wondered if anything on earth could frighten our Aunt Drake.

I could not sleep. I did not even close my eyes. I lay staring at the strange, weird scene around me—the rough floor with the red fire-light coming up from the room below and shining through the gaps between the shrunken planks and striking here and there upon the bunches of coppery onions, red peppers and green or gray herbs hanging from the rough roof. The dried herbs were aromatic and filled the air of the loft with an agreeable odor. Presently another odor not altogether unpleasant mingled with it. Our bed stood immediately over the front of the fireplace below and with its head against the chimney. Through the cracks of the floor now came up the fumes of the good Maryland tobacco. By this I knew the old man was sitting by the fire smoking his pipe.

The hut was very still. I could hear the slightest sound below, as when the old man moved his feet, knocked the ashes out of his pipe or cleared his throat. I thought the woman must have retired, but I was mistaken, for presently I heard the man growl forth:

"Why the devil don't you go to bed, Peggy? What are you sittin' up and waitin' fur? This ain't no work fur you, no how! Go to bed!"

"Oh, Luke, I couldn't compose myself now, no how! I feel sort o' roused up! And I am thot oneasy 'bout the boys! They'll come to harm some night! Now mind, I tell you! No, I couldn't go to sleep now!" answered the woman in a penetrating whisper.

"Couldn't, eh? Well we'll see 'bout that!" muttered the man, as he got up and shuffled across the floor, made a rattling noise on the shelves and shuffled back, muttering:

"Here! drink this! This will put you to sleep sound enough, I bet you!"

"Oh! aint it too much arter what I have took?" she murmured doubtfully.

"No! That's gone off! Drink this!"

Apparently the woman obeyed, for I heard her slight sigh, muffled movements and the creak of the bed as she dropped wearily upon it, moaning and muttering something inaudible about "This here business."

I heard the old man sink upon his chair, which also creaked, and then all was dead silence for some minutes that seemed hours to me. What was the old villain waiting for? What heinous, murderous crime was he contemplating? Was he expecting his confederates in crime? Jim Fice's band of desperadoes? What did he mean to do with us? If it was only robbery! But it might be murder! Oh! how I wished we had stayed out in the carry-all on the road and braved the storm! We might only have caught cold, but now we are caught like poor rabbits in a trap! Oh! it was fate! It was fate! And who can withstand fate? "Whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad," said the wise man. Surely we were mad to come under any circumstances to such a place as this! A lonely hut in the thick woods far from any traveled road! And with the air alive with rumors of robberies, murders and violence of the most atrocious description! Oh! what had become of Aunt Sukey's prudence and Cousin Tommy's common sense? Here was Aunt Sukey sleeping as soundly as if there was not a Fice's band, or a murdered peddler, or a burned house heard of in the world! There was Tommy Sparks who had allowed himself to be sent out of the house to sleep in the shed with the horse, without a word of objection, and as if there were no women to protect! And where was the blunderbus? In the possession of that old demon below, no doubt! If I could only get to Tommy Sparks and wake him! But I felt that if I attempted to do so I should never get past that old murderer alive! If I only dared to wake Aunt Sukey! But again in this instance I felt sure that if I should make any demonstration I should only precipitate a catastrophe! How soundly she slept! How awfully still the place was! I could have screamed in my nervousness! It would have relieved me to do so! But it would have been the signal for my death, and I forbore.

The old wretch below cleared his throat in a half suppressed way, yet it startled me like a war whoop! It sharpened all my terrors to acute agony. Oh! what was he waiting for? It was after midnight. It was already Christmas eve. What horrid thing was he waiting for? Jim Fice and his bloody band to help him to murder us and make away with our bodies before they should divide the booty! Yes! That was what he was waiting for! What ought I to do? Ah! what indeed could I do? Wake up Aunt Drake and make a dash down the ladder toward the door for dear life? Worse than useless, for that would only hasten our doom! We should be met at the foot of the ladder with a gun or an axe and be shot down or cloven down at once! There was nothing else to be done then except to wait, tremble and pray. And oh! did I not pray! Yes! as I never prayed before in my life!

Hark! What was that?

My worst fears realized! The deep stillness broken by the sound of many footsteps craunching through the dry brush and frozen snow, and approaching the hut. The time had come! My heart seemed to die within me. Before the new comers could reach the house, the old assassin rose slowly, shuffled over the floor and opened the door.

I held my breath to listen. My ears became as the ears of rabbits. My sense of hearing preternaturally acute as that of "Fine Ear" of the fairy tale. I heard the old criminal whisper in that penetrating key which goes much farther than it is meant to go:

"Hish, sh-sh-sh-! Don't make a bit of noise!"

"Wot's up now?" growled a deep voice as the crowd entered the room.

"Hish-sh-sh-sh-sh-! Travelers from Washington! Quality! Rich! Oh, I tell you!"

"Who are they? Men or women? queried a third voice.

"Hish-sh-sh-sh-! Ole 'oman, young gal, and boy!"

"Umph-humph!"

"Hish-sh-sh! Now set right down and pull off them heavy boots 'fore you come to the fire! Don't want to 'sturb 'em."

I heard every word, every movement. I seemed to know everything that passed as if I had been in the room with them. The men dropped on the floor and drew off their boots, conversing in whispers. Presently a voice that had not spoken before inquired:

"Where've you put 'em?"

"Ole 'oman and gal in the loft; young youth in the shed."

The crowd, having got rid of their boots, shuffled over the earthen floor and drew stools around the fireplace, where they seated themselves. There was a slight motion among them as of filling pipes, and then clouds of tobacco smoke rose through the cracked floor, in the midst of which the old cut-throat inquired:

"Any luck tonight, Jim?"

"Jim!!!" My hair bristled up from my scalp! My skin turned to goose flesh? Marrow curdled! Blood froze! "Jim!!!" Then it was the terrible outlaw's band of murderers among whom we had fallen, helpless!

But the evil council was going on below. A low, muttered ebulition of profanity escaped The Fice in reply to the question.

"Tain't no use to curse and swar, Jim! Cussin' and swarin' never clothed the back nor filled the belly as ever I heerd tell!" said the old bandit.

"Such infernal luck! The most cussed luck of the whole winter!" growled the outlaw with the fierceness of a wild beast balked of its prey.

"Well, never mind, Jim! This here windfall will make up for it all! Ah! yes, they're awful rich, I reckon!" said the old wretch.

And then they fell to smoking so assiduously as to suspend their conversation.

Presently I heard the men muttering again, and the first distinct words I heard instantly sharpened all my faculties to the keenest sense of terror in the vision of impending death! It was the old head demon who was speaking.

"No, Jim! No! You may be good enough out doors, but for a cute job like this you're too rough! I'll go and do it myself, soon as ever I feel sure they're fast asleep. But it is jist as well to be all ready for the job. Where's that butcher's knife? Go look for it under the shelf, and that bit of grindstone. I must put a sharp edge onter it!"

Don't ask me how I felt as I heard the stealthy steps cross the floor, and hands rummage among the iron ware, and then the return of the messenger and the old murderer's grunt of satisfaction as he took the stone and the knife and began to sharpen the blade. I had thought I had suffered the last extremity of terror, horror! But when I heard the sharpening of that blade meant for cutting our throats!! I learned that the passion of fear, the capacity of anguish had infinite possibilities!

On and on it went, back and forth with a rasping sound that I seemed to feel upon my flesh! Sometimes he would submit the blade to one of his companions to feel if it was sharp enough, and then recommence the sharpening. Ah! how that sound grated through nerves and heart and brain! I lay there, no longer listening, but, through extreme nervous tension, bearing and almost seeing all that passed below; but with a sickening, sinking, expiring feeling like death.

"That'll do!" growled the old tiger, ceasing to rasp the knife.

"Better let me or Jim go and do it, ole man," muttered one of the outlaws.

"No! I tell you. You'd raise too much noise. Don't want no 'sturbance; I'll go my own self," growled the wild beast, getting up and moving towards the trap-door.

I was dying, I felt sure! Dying already! No need to cut my throat! I heard, as if in a death dream, the cautious, shuffling feet of the fiend as he came to the foot of the ladder and began to climb up slowly, panting, and stopping and listening.

Strange brain of the human! In that deadly cataleptic horror that bound me some gleams of reason penetrated. The grim thought came that it was best to lie still and die quietly, since there was no earthly help for us. Queer! I even thought of the hangman's advice to his "patient," "if you'll be quiet, you'll not suffer! You'll not even know when you die!" All this passed through my expiring brain while the old demon was coming up the ladder. My eyes were wide open—staring. There came a red glow of light. The trap-door was lifted. One gaunt red arm, bared to the elbow, appeared, holding it up. Then the bald red head, with the evil inflamed face, the mangy beard and the blood-shot eyes staring around as if half frightened at the crime he was about to commit. Lastly appeared the other arm, with its bony hand grasping in one clutch an iron candlestick with a lighted tallow dip and the handle of a huge butcher's knife with its blade flashing keenly in the flame. That picture will never leave me while I live. He carefully laid back the trap-door, slowly came out, glared around the loft, set his candlestick on the floor, sniffed his butcher's knife more conveniently in his hand and then crept, crouching and panting like some wild beast, on toward the bed on which I lay dying—yes, dying—beside my aunt. That was the last I saw. Human nature could bear no more. I died and the "bitterness of death" was past. It is said that "nature has her own anæsthetics." The timely swoon is one of them. In that deep syncope I died, to all intents and purposes, for the time being and lay dead to all that passed around me.

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When at length I woke to life it was scarcely to consciousness. I did not know where I was, how I came there or scarcely who or what I was. The past chaotic, the present was blank, the future vague. Streams of pale silvery light glanced through the rifts in the rough gable end opposite my bed. Yes! I was lying on a bed, and some one was lying beside me. I was as weak as a new-born babe and almost as ignorant of my surroundings. I was in a rude loft with a rough plank roof rising from the eaves and meeting at a long beam overhead that was decorated with bunches of dried roots and herbs that filled the air with an aromatic odor.

The chord of association was there struck, and memory awakened. I was Dolly Phippard and this was Aunt Sukey Drake who was sleeping beside me. We were in that lonely hut in the woods where we had sought shelter from the snow storm only to fall into the lair of the most murderous gang that ever terrorized a neighborhood! We had been within an inch of having our throats cut when I fainted! What had happened after that? How had we been saved? What had become of Jim Fice and his gang of assassins? Had the constables and a posse been dogging them and tracked them to their lair, and fallen upon them just in time to save us? And was there no one left in the house but ourselves?

The place was very still! And very dark except for the moonbeams shining through the broken gable. No more red light came up through the cracks in the floor. Evidently the fire was out below. While wondering over the situation I heard movements in the room under us, but they only raised my curiosity, not my fears. I listened. Perhaps it was the woman. But no; the sounds were those of the waking, yawning and tumbling up of men from the floor in front of the fireplace. The muffled and confused sounds were followed by a gruff, sleepy voice muttering:

"It's cleared off cold, as I knowed it would! Bill, pull on your boots and go fetch a bucket of water from the spring, while I make up the fire!"

Then I heard one go out, and another raking the chunks and coals together in the chimney place. While this was going on I perceived that day was dawning. The pale white moonbeams were fading before the faint red sun's rays.

But what did all this mean? Had my fright been a mere nightmare dream? No! I was sure that I had not slept nor felt it possible to sleep for one instant that night.

Before I could speculate further another sound came from below. The old couple were waking up on the bed and yawning, grunting and mumbling. Then I heard them get up just as the man who went to the spring for water returned. And now all the various preparations for the breakfast began. And, thank Heaven! my aunt awoke at last, and I could question her.

She awakened as clear headed as if she had not slept like death in a strange loft in the woods. She sat up in the bed, yawned, gaped and asked me how I had slept.

"Not very well," I answered. "But you, Aunt Sukey, slept like a top. Did you hear nothing to disturb you?"

"No! Yes! That old man came up here to cut some of those provisions down and about half woke me, but I was so dead for sleep that I went off again before he got through," she answered, as she got out of bed and began to dress very quickly, for the loft was bitterly cold.

Well!!!! But it would take a whole line of exclamation points to express my amazement! Had I been an idiot after all? Had I allowed my imagination to deceive me? To distort everything I had seen and heard? I did not linger long over my toilet. I can tell you! As soon as we were dressed we went down stairs.

In the light of day and of reason how different all things looked from what they appeared on the night before! That rude but with its walls of mossy logs; its floor of beaten earth; its broad chimney place with the biggest wood fire I had ever seen in my life; its little clear window and its open door, showing the bright morning sky and the snow-laden trees and snow-covered ground, had a picturesque, wild wood charm of its own.

The room had been "fixed up for company," too! The bed in one corner was covered with a nice clean patch-work quilt of red and white. The shelves in the opposite corner, with their vessels of copper and tin, shone as with silver and gold. The earthen floor was as clean as a steamer's deck. In the midst of it stood the table covered with a clean crash cloth and adorned with white stone crockery ware. The breakfast was ready, being kept hot ever the fire or on the earthen hearth before it.

There was no one in the room but our host and hostess, both dressed up for company—he in a home-made suit of dark brown cloth and a clean white shirt, she in a nice dark blue calico gown, white apron, and a white handkerchief pinned around her neck.

What scurvy tricks had imagination, inspired by suspicion and terror, played me? The old man's face was deeply sunburned and his eyes were weak. But where were the dark, wicked, sinister looks of last night?

Our host and hostess greeted us cheerfully.

"I hope as I didn't 'sturb you when I went up in the loft arter them things?" inquired the old man politely.

"Well," said truthful Aunt Sukey, reluctantly, "you did half wake me, but I went to sleep again while you were cutting them down."

"Sorry," said the old man, "but you see, marm, I had to go and get suthin down for the boys' supper, let alone your own breakfast, but I did try to be as quiet as I could. Come! Draw up," he added, as his wife placed the last dish on the table.

We sat down accordingly to an excellent breakfast of coffee, cream, hot rolls, buckwheat cakes, fresh butter, honey, fried ham and eggs.

"Where is Mr. Sparks? I haven't seen him this morning!" anxiously inquired Aunt Sukey.

"Which? Oh, you mean the young youth as come 'long o' you? Bless you! He were up bright and early this morning to 'tend to the creetur. And now he's gone 'long o' the boys to the blacksmith shop to get her rough shod for the slippery roads 'for they harness of her up. They'll be along soon. Come, try to make out a breakfast! Do! So sorry we haint got nuthin better for sich quality as you, but the boys hadn't no luck last night, or else you'd a had a coon or 'possum or suthin o'fresh meat."

Aunt Sukey assured our host that the breakfast was most satisfactory, but forbore to add that we would as soon have feasted on rats and mice as on raccoons or opossums.

Tommy Sparks came in at this moment and explained that Mr. Jim, Mr. Bill, Mr. Jack and Mr. Sam (Tommy was the soul of politeness) were busy out doors, but would be in after a while.

"Them's my boys!" exclaimed the old man, laughing. "They are that shy of the ladies! Draw up, young gentleman."

Thus bidden, Tommy Sparks sat down to the table, and soon demolished all that was left on the board. Then he wiped his mouth, rose and said:

"Now, Aunt Drake, the mare is put to the carry-all and the trunk is strapped on behind, and all is ready. Mr. Jack and Mr. Sam helped me to back the carry-all down the thicket until we got to where we could turn it round. The road is good, too. The snow is frozen hard and there is no wind. We shall have a spanking drive to Spring Hill."

"Are we far from the New Cut road? Mr. ——, I really don't know your name," said Aunt Sukey.

"Ed'ards, marm! Luke Ed'ards! And you must 'a took the wrong turn at the fork, 'bout three mile up the road from where we found your carry-all. I'll go 'long o' you and put you in the right road. I've got a airrant up that way and had as lief go as not."

"You are very kind, Mr. Edwards, and we thank you very much. Now let us have a settlement," said Aunt Sukey, taking out her pocket book. "What have we to pay you?"

The old man hesitated, rubbed his red crown until it was redder than ever, and said:

"Why, marm, it goes to my heart to charge ladies! 'Specially such ladies! It do, indeed! But you know you come in the dead o' night and made me rouse up my po' ole 'oman to git supper for you and she gone to bed with a dose o' laudamy for her toothache."

"I am very sorry," began my aunt.

"Oh! don't mention on it! It had to be done! And then I had to turn out in the snow storm to help the young youth to tote in the trunk and lead the creetur and 'tend to her and rub her down and all."

"I am very sorry you had so much trouble," said aunt.

"Oh, thar warnt no help for that! And then three on you had supper, let alone the creetur what had a warm mash. And then you two ladies had the boys' own loft, and that the oniest room they had. And you all had breakfast this morning and feeding o' the creetur. And Jim, he's the blacksmith, rough shod the creetur, and the ——"

"Never mind the items, Mr. Edwards!" impatiently exclaimed aunt, naturally suspecting our host of "piling up the agonies" in the accommodations we had received for the sake of raising the bill. We are greatly indebted to you, but pray let us know to what extent?"

He looked at her deprecatingly, rubbed his head and said:

"You see, it's because I have to charge ladies! Let me see. Well—now really—would you think as how—well—say ten 'leven penny bits was too much?"

Aunt Sukey gasped! She thought that the man might reasonably charge $3. She had been prepared by his talk to hear him charge six. But ten 'leven penny bits—$1.25 of the old currency! It shamed her into generosity.

"Tommy Sparks!" she cried sharply, handing him her pocket book, "here, pay Mr. Edwards a $5 bill? Our entertainment was worth every dollar of it!"

It was now old Edwards turn to gasp.

"No! no! no!" he cried with feeble demur.

But when Tommy Sparks forced the note upon him, he took it with a child's frank, broad grin of delight and turning to his old wife said in triumph:

"There! didn't I tell the boys so? As how these ladies 'ould make it up to them fer all their bad luck last night, eh? I knowed the quality."

We took leave of our hostess and, accompanied by the old man, left the hut and entered the thicket by a narrow path which had escaped our sight in the darkness of the previous night. A short walk brought us to the road and a few hundred yards farther to our carry-all. When we reached it we found Kitty with her head in a nose-bag and a tall, stalwart, red haired, freckled-faced young man watching her. He immediately ducked his head and left.

"That's Jim! Don't mind him! Never did see a young feller so shy o' ladies, marm," giggled the old man.

Aunt Sukey and myself were hoisted to our places on the back seat. Tommy Sparks and Mr. Edwards mounted on the front, and we started.

"Has anything been heard of Jim Fice and his gang lately?" inquired our aunt of Mr. Edwards.

"Lots, marm! But I won't scare you ladies by telling on um. Why, when you knocked at the door last night I thought as you war